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## CARICATURE, PARODY, SATIRE: NARRATIVE MASKS AS SUBVERSION OF THE PICARO IN PATRICK SÜSKIND'S *PERFUME*

Edith Borchardt

Patrick Süskind's novel *Perfume* (1985) is a picaresque narrative<sup>1</sup> that foregrounds the fantastic fictional biography of a pathological individual gifted with an extraordinary sense of smell against the background of a historically verifiable locale and context: eighteenth-century Paris and the beginnings of olfactory science in pre-Revolutionary France.<sup>2</sup> With his cleverly crafted story and eloquent account of his picaro's non-verbal experience of the world as a perfumer, Süskind expertly employs but simultaneously subverts the traditional form of the picaresque novel. Instead of deconstructing the picaro's narration by calling into question the veracity of the biographical account through a second narrator or an omniscient implied author,<sup>3</sup> Süskind establishes his premise for the fictional life story as an exaggeration through the hyperbolic distortion of the personality, which (because of its incredibility) serves as a distancing device like authorial voice-over in the traditional form.<sup>4</sup>

The hypersensitivity of *Perfume*'s central character establishes the protagonist as a caricature<sup>5</sup> and his talents and activities as pure fantasy. From the outset of the novel, Grenouille is described as a gifted abomination, arrogant, misanthropic, immoral, and wicked (3). His own lack of smell from babyhood points to his lack of humanity, inspiring fear and the suspicion of evil. The baby appears capable of "seeing" with his nostrils, that "like the cups of that small meat-eating plant that was kept in the royal botanical gardens . . . seemed to create an eerie suction" (17). To Father Terrier, temporarily caring for the infant at the cloister of Saint-Merri, it seems as if the child were "smelling right through his skin, into his innards. His most tender emotions, his filthiest thoughts lay exposed to that greedy little nose, which wasn't even a proper nose, but only a pug of a nose, a tiny perforated organ, forever crinkling and puffing and quivering" (17). His foster mother, Madame Gaillard, believes he has

second sight because of his ability to see the future, predicting the arrival of visitors long before their arrival, or the occurrence of a thunderstorm when there is not a cloud in the sky. He has the ability to see right through paper, cloth, wood, brick walls, and locked doors. He can tell if there is a worm in the cauliflower before the head is split open, and when Madame misplaces her money, he knows exactly where it is. His hypersensitive nose catches the smell of the people, the rain, the worm, the money.

Considered feeble-minded by representatives of conventional educational institutions because of his poor verbal ability, Grenouille nevertheless grows into a genius of perception, an autodidact with "a huge vocabulary of odors that enabled him to form at will great numbers of smelled sentences" (26) for which ordinary language is insufficient. To him, the smell of milk varies according to its temperature or how much cream there is in it, which cow it came from, and even what the cow had been eating. Smoke consists of "hundreds of odors mixed iridescently into ever new and changing unities" (25). He develops a tremendous analytic capacity, unraveling vapors and stench "into single strands of unitary odors that could not be unthreaded further" (34). His sense of smell conjures up visions of the essence of the object perceived, and in the current of the wind he can smell faraway places: the meadows around Neuilly, the forests between Saint-Germain and Versailles, far-off cities like Rouen and Caen, and even the sea. Waking and dreaming, he arranges his recollected odors into an elaborate system, "ever more refined . . . ever more comprehensive and differentiated" (44), and transforms smells he has gathered into new combinations in his imagination.

The guiding light and muse of his endeavors is the fragrance of the redhead girl in the Rue de Marais whom he killed at the age of thirteen. Her smell—internalized atavistically by a rape with his nose—becomes his standard for beauty, an inspiration toward perfection and a striving for the sublime. As a perfumer's apprentice, he invents new basic odors, first deriving oils from plants like nettles, cress seeds, elderberry bark, and yew sprigs, then trying to derive them from substances like glass, brass, porcelain, leather, grain and gravel, and then from dirt, blood, wood, fresh fish, hair, and water from the Seine—even though the distillation process is pointless for substances lacking essential oils. Finally he progresses to the extraction of essences from animals and human beings, particularly nubile young women, in order to create an *essence absolue* that captures their beauty in the invisible form of their fragrance.

As an osphretic idealist and creator of scents, Grenouille is an artist who employs the process of maceration and enfleurage, eliminating the physical body or form of flowers in order to create beauty that is non-visual and more ephemeral than the beauty expressed in image or word, and perceptible only to the sense of smell that "Kant wouldn't admit . . . into his aesthetics" (Adams 24). The product of his art not only represents but *is* the essence of things, the elusive and evanescent quality gained by the destruction of form. Misapplying this



aesthetic to the human realm, Grenouille resorts to murder to obtain the perfume he will use to attract the love of other human beings. He begins to imagine himself to be like an omnipotent God in his ability to control people, a fantasy that reaches megalomaniacal proportions in his seclusion in the cave of the volcano Plomb du Cantal in the Massif Central of Auvergne.

Ironically, his dreams are realized only on the scaffold where, at his execution, a few drops from his vial of precious essence suffice to turn his death scene into a bacchanal in which he comes to embody the ultimate desire of each of the spectators. Nuns see in him Christ personified, devil worshipers perceive the Lord of Darkness, subscribers to Enlightenment ideals see him as the Highest Being, young women imagine him to be their Prince Charming, and men the mirror image of themselves. He touches all at their erotic center, overpowering them with his charisma and turning the execution into an orgy: "It was as if the man had ten thousand invisible hands and had laid a hand on the genitals of the ten thousand people surrounding him and fondled them in just the way that each of them, whether man or woman, desired in his or her most secret fantasies" (238).

With an antirational epistemology based on smell and represented by the figure of Grenouille, Süskind parodies Kantian theories of the origins and nature of knowledge by exploring the idea that the highest aesthetic abstraction can be achieved through the most primitive of the senses. At the same time, his novel serves as a critique of this grotesquerie, an inversion of the eighteenth-century notion of *kalokagathia*, and a travesty of Platonic thought. The picaro by definition is a social deviant, and the artist in this novel is neither good nor moral, but a criminal genius who lacks integration on both the social and psychological level and who is motivated not by eros (the union of phenomena and spirit) but by thanatos (the separation of body and soul).

Grenouille's art derives from primitive sense perception (through the nose) rather than from reason and the perception of abstract form (through the eye and ear), the latter privileged by Kant, whose rational epistemology has dominated Western thought. Instead of integrating form with idea in Platonic reminiscence of *eidos* as a function of consciousness in the act of artistic creation, the *essence absolue* is gained at the expense of form. The artist in *Perfume* resorts to murder to attain the ultimate reality that theoretically lies in a realm that transcends phenomena, rather than trying to reach this knowledge through reason and reflection. The Kantian process of coming to consciousness is reversed; analysis is applied in the place of synthesis, critical methods replace creativity.

Grenouille's art does not serve a spiritual goal, since his idealism is nothing but a solipsistic narcissism that is completely self-serving in its instrumentalization of his genius for the sake of power and the control of the masses. It is not used to reveal truth, but to deceive the public by a substitution of Self for divinity in a delusional spectacle that results not in revelation but in hallucination. Because of the misuse of his genius, Grenouille is identified with

evil and self-destructs at the end as a result of his own success, applying the *essence absolue* at the moment of his annihilation. By undermining the credibility of his picaro by positing him as a caricature and destroying him at the end, Süskind negates the world view implied by the demented vision of the criminal artist and restores the moral and aesthetic status quo.

The caricature of the individual personality as presented in this fictional biography of the protagonist functions like a political cartoon<sup>6</sup> in that it makes mocking reference to the historical and social context within and against which the picaro operates. As a type, the picaro is a criminal or rogue but not necessarily a villain (Chandler 2; Parker 3-6) who wanders from place to place, "travers[ing] various social milieux" and encountering people who represent "a cross section of contemporary manners, morals and idiosyncrasies" (Bjornson 9). Their interrelationship in the picaresque convention is "frequently based upon caricatural distortion, polemic effect, or imaginative projection into fantastic realms" (Bjornson 14). History, geography, and social milieux serve as the realistic backdrop to the picaro's adventures. Their juxtaposition creates the illusion of relationship between the picaro and his society and produces the impression of three-dimensionality. While the society in which he lives completes and explains his psychological profile, his one-dimensionality as an *idiot savant* (*ein weiser Narr*) brings into focus societal traits that become the object of criticism and satire (Schöll 305).

Through the figure of Baldini, the master perfumer and representative of the Enlightenment, Süskind satirizes conservative notions about politics, economics, and science at a time of radical change, when the *Encyclopédistes* were stirring revolutionary sentiments. Grenouille, who cannot reason politically, is a revolutionary on the aesthetic plane. Together with Baldini's rival Pélissier, who represents the commercialization of art, Grenouille serves as a counterpoint to Baldini, the craftsman who is the product of a long tradition of learning going back to the Middle Ages, but whose creativity—limited by empiricism and analysis—has exhausted itself. In the interplay between the intuitive and the rational approach to artistic creation, Grenouille becomes the bearer of aesthetic ideas that are at the opposite pole to traditional notions of art at the time of the Enlightenment. Born into a feudal society that is about to undergo tremendous transformation, Grenouille—though a child of the Enlightenment era—nevertheless represents its dialectical opposite: the repressed dark and daemonic forces, held in abeyance by the Age of Reason, now emerging from the unconscious with destructive power.

For profit and fame, Baldini allies himself in Faustian fashion with the principle of evil embodied in Grenouille, and together they achieve success at a global level. Observing his apprentice at work, and copying the recipes for the perfumes Grenouille creates, Baldini develops a "curious after-the-fact method" (91) to ensure for himself the ability to imitate these original creations. In a reversal of roles, he becomes the sorcerer's apprentice for material gain, while



Grenouille learns from the master not his art but his craft. In true picaresque fashion he adapts himself to Baldini's mania for rules and measurements, for analysis and formulae, in order to assure his existence in the bourgeois world. Under the guise of middle-class respectability, in possession of the knowledge of his craft, he aims to create the scents that he carries within him and to make his fantasies real.

By fictionalizing French social history and the beginnings of olfactory science in pre-Revolutionary Paris through the fantastic biography of a picaro, Süskind satirizes both the theories of the time about the nature of art and of the artist, and attitudes toward progress through education and scientific investigation deriving from the classical *Humanitätsideal*. Upon his return to the world after his Romantic sojourn in the Massif Central during the Seven Years War, Grenouille encounters the Marquis de la Taillade-Espinasse, whose most significant contribution to science was his theory of the *fluidum letale*, expressed in a treatise on the relationship between proximity to the earth and vital energy. "His thesis was that life could develop only at a certain distance from the earth, since the earth itself constantly emits a corrupting gas, a so-called *fluidum letale*, which lames vital energies and sooner or later totally extinguishes them" (139-40). Grenouille, who had neither washed, nor shaved, nor cut his hair, nails, or beard during his seven years of sepulchral seclusion in the cave, and survived on a diet of salamanders, ring snakes, lichen, grass, and mossberries, becomes a subject of scientific investigation for the marquis and other academics. At the University of Montpellier, he is presented as the scientific sensation of the year: living proof of the correctness of the marquis's theory. By using a ventilation machine and giving him foods originating in creatures far removed from the earth—dove bouillon, lark pie, ragout of wild duck—the Marquis submits Grenouille to a vital therapy to counteract the *fluidum letale*, and to "humanize" the Hermit/King/God/Beast. For the first time, Grenouille sees himself in a mirror, looking "unbelievably normal" (144), though he still lacks human smell. The reflection in the mirror negates the humanity of the image by flaring its nostrils "surreptitiously" (145).

In order to pass for a human being, Grenouille develops masks of human scent for himself in Runel's laboratory in Montpellier. He produces "the scent of humanness" (148) in order to deceive others by passing off this imitation body odor as his own so that they will regard him as one of them. Refining this basic perfume into smells for all occasions in Madame Arnulfi's shop, he creates a number of personal odors: one for inconspicuousness when mingling with people, another more sweaty and coarse to receive fast attention when doing business, a third for arousing sympathy like a little boy, and one with a nauseating quality for occasions when he wants to be avoided. He wears these odors, changing them "like clothes as the situation demanded" (184), in order to hide his true nature from others while pursuing his secret passion of perfecting

human scent. With his genius and artistry, he compensates for his lack of humanity.

The use of masks and role playing permits the picaro, who is by birth a social outcast, to adapt himself to external circumstances to "secure his own survival and psychological well-being" (Bjornson 6). Grenouille's efforts at social conformity through the invention of masks of scent in order to seem human only mask his consuming desire to develop the ultimate fragrance that will elevate him above humanity. With the sublime essence he procures through mass murder, he raises himself to superhuman status, at the same time willing his own destruction. This occurs in a cannibalistic rite reminiscent of the dismemberment of Dionysus or an inversion of the transubstantial ritual of Holy Communion. His seemingly total annihilation, however, symbolically implies the threat of his eternal return among the participants, a marginal group in society that literally internalise the principle of evil.

With the allusion to modern genocide, Süskind reveals the connection between the fictional fantasy and historical truth. With the aid of a picaresque form that allows for ironic distance and the freedom of aesthetic play, Süskind both constructs and deconstructs this fictional precursor of a misguided idealism who—by the misapplication of abstract concepts to the living world—destroys human beings for the sake of an idea. In the novel, the evil genius parading in the mask of humanity is annihilated and his desire destroyed, but history (presented here in the guise of fantasy) suggests that Grenouille's dangerous idealism cannot be so easily expunged.

## NOTES

1. The literature on the picaro is voluminous. For the construction of a paradigm of the picaresque novel and its use in post-war German literature, see Schöll 302-21.

2. Consult Corbin for a historical treatment of the development of olfactory science (11-85) and hygiene (89-135) in France.

3. Friedman speaks of an "interplay between narrator and implied author" in which the picaro's discursive strategies backfire and "incriminate rather than defend the speaker"; the implied author "negates the authority of the outsider" by providing a voice-over to his story, a counterpart or alternative reading (*Antiheroine's* xiii).

4. See Friedman, "Picaresque" (120) on this double narrative structure.

5. Modern caricature, focussing on the face, originated in seventeenth-century Italy and was practised by such famed artists as Carracci and Bernini.

6. The cartoon, primarily a nineteenth-century para-artistic form, mocks social and political figures and events by exaggerated presentation or ludicrous juxtaposition.

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